

Which factors influence early language learning?

What this research was about and why it is important

Early language learning has become increasingly popular in Europe. There is considerable variation across and within countries regarding teachers' proficiency in the foreign language they teach and how much teaching time learners receive in the language they are studying. In order for early language learning to be successful, we need to understand how these factors influence language learning in the early years. This study looked at the influence of teachers' language proficiency and amount of weekly teaching learners received in a foreign language on learners' vocabulary and grammar development. Researchers also measured how exposure to the language outside the classroom and language aptitude (i.e.: talent) influenced learners' language development.

What the researchers did

- Participants were 187 young foreign language learners (87 girls, 100 boys) aged 4 at the beginning of the study. They were enrolled in 14 schools teaching English from an early age in the Netherlands.
- 26 children of the same age but without exposure to English also took part as a comparison group.
- Learners were tested at the beginning of primary school, after one and after two years of learning English.
- Teachers' English proficiency ranged from A1 (beginner) to C2 (mastery). The study also included teachers who were native speakers. Some lessons were co-taught by native and non-native teachers.
- Learners had between 40 and 225 minutes of English lessons per week.
- Parents were asked how much English their children heard outside school (38 minutes at start of primary school, 144 at the end of year 1 and 155 minutes after 2 years of English, but there was a lot of variation between children).
- Children were tested using two standardised tests of English language development; one vocabulary test (PPVT-4) and one grammar test (TROG).
- Language aptitude was measured by testing their ability to memorise and repeat strings of numbers and nonsense words.

What the researchers found

- Children who were in early language learning programmes scored much higher on the language tests than children who did not have any language lessons at that stage.
- The English grammar and vocabulary of all children with language lessons improved a lot after one and two years of learning English.
- Children with more than 60 minutes of English lessons a week did much better on the language tasks than children who had 60 minutes or less of language lessons per week.
- For vocabulary, there was no difference between children without any English lessons and those who had 60 minutes or less of exposure to English per week.
- The most important factor for learners' language development was their teachers' own proficiency in the language.
- Children, whose teachers only had a B-Level of English, developed more slowly than the other groups. When native speaker teachers taught in teams with teachers who had a lower English proficiency, learners did better.
- The combination of teachers' lower language proficiency and little language teaching had a particularly negative effect on learners' language outcomes.
- Children who did better on the memory tasks also did better at the language tests.
- Exposure to the language outside school did not have a big influence on learners' performance in this study.

Things to consider

- Dutch is closely related to English, so even children without any form-oriented English lessons might have been able to recognise some of the words in the test. In the Netherlands, English is also very present in the normal environment outside school, so children without any form-oriented language lessons might be able to pick up some words from their environment. This might differ in other contexts.
- Native speaker teachers appeared to compensate for lower language levels of their colleagues but in this study, native speakers were also specialist language teachers. Another study would need to look at which of these factors had more impact on children's language development.